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**Evangelical Universalism? A Critical Analysis of the Universalist Tendencies in the Work
of Gregory MacDonald and Tom Greggs.**

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My aim in this thesis is to analyse the recent development of evangelical writers who defend Christian universalism. I will look at why this theological position is so attractive to them. I will examine and evaluate in some detail the writings of Gregory MacDonald and Tom Greggs on this issue. I will consider just how compatible Christian universalism is with traditional evangelicalism.

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

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Introduction

There has been a long history of Christian universalism stretching all the way back to the Early Church. Universalism was first systematised in the third century by Origen in his doctrine of *apokatastasis*. Theologians like Augustine prepared the way for the anathematizing of universalism at the Second Council of Constantinople (553). Historically evangelicals and universalism have not mixed. What has surprised me and aroused my interest in recent years is the appearance of evangelical theologians who speak strongly in defence of Christian universalism. This development is new to evangelicalism. David Hilborn and Don Horrocks have written:

The traditional view of universalism and evangelicalism is that they are mutually exclusive. In a historical survey of universalism published for the British evangelical journal *Themelios* in 1979, Richard Bauckham associated the doctrine with 'less conservative' theologians and barely mentioned anyone who could be classed as an evangelical (2006, p. 196).

Daniel Strange, who is currently a lecturer at Oak Hill College and belongs to the evangelical Calvinist tradition, has written an excellent analysis on inclusivism in recent evangelical theology. Hilborn and Horrocks report that, "Strange's assessment of the current scene leads him to declare that he knows 'of no published evangelical who holds to the doctrine of universalism'" (2006, p. 197). This is certainly not the case today. Evangelical theologians such as Gregory MacDonald (a pseudonym for Robin Parry) and Tom Greggs are unashamedly universalists and evangelicals and have written at length on the matter. In this thesis I will examine why some evangelicals have started to defend universalism in print. I will evaluate the arguments of MacDonald and Greggs in some detail and I will consider just how compatible Christian universalism is with evangelicalism. Firstly, I will define what I mean by 'evangelical' and 'universalism'.

Defining Evangelicalism

Derek Tidball writes, "The word 'evangelical' comes from the Greek word for 'good news' which takes us to the heart of the matter. Evangelicals are 'gospel' people" (1994, p. 11). John Stott states that the two key distinguishing marks of evangelicals are that they are Bible people and they are Gospel people. He writes, "The supremacy of Scripture has always been and always will be the first hallmark of an evangelical" (1977, p. 6). He goes on to

state, “And if the first hallmark of the evangelical is biblical supremacy, the second is the centrality of the Gospel” (1977, p. 10). Robert K. Johnston, speaking of contemporary descriptions of American evangelicalism writes:

For all of their variety and particularity, descriptions of contemporary American evangelicalism have a commonality centred on a threefold commitment: a dedication to the gospel that is expressed in a personal faith in Christ as Lord, an understanding of the gospel as defined authoritatively by Scripture, and a desire to communicate the gospel both in evangelism and social reform. Evangelicals are those who believe the gospel is to be experienced personally, defined biblically, and communicated passionately (1991, p. 261).

The best summary of evangelicalism is perhaps that of David Bebbington in his study on *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989, p. 1-19). He identifies four key characteristics of evangelicalism which have become known as the ‘Bebbington Quadrilateral’. These four characteristics he describes as conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. Evangelicals call all to individually repent of their sins and turn in faith to Christ. Evangelicals are encouraged to get involved in zealous activity to promote the gospel and they have a very high regard for the Bible and consider it trustworthy in all matters of faith and conduct. Finally, evangelicals emphasise all that Christ achieved upon the cross. Speaking of ‘Bebbington’s Quadrilateral’, Tidball writes, “His suggestions have met with a ready response from across the spectrum of evangelicals and has quickly established itself as near to a consensus as we might ever expect to reach” (1994, p. 14).

Timothy Larsen expands slightly on Bebbington’s summary with his ‘Pentagon’. This is how he defines an evangelical (2007, p. 1):

An evangelical is:

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;

5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.

All of Bebbington's characteristics are covered here but Larsen also helpfully places evangelicalism into its historical context.

Mark Noll, in his study of *American Evangelical Christianity* looked to see where the statements of faith of a wide cross-section of American evangelical denominations and parachurch groups converged (2001, p. 59-63). He examined the statements of faith of three of the largest American denominations in the evangelical tradition; namely the 'Southern Baptist Convention', the 'Church of God in Christ' and the 'Assemblies of God'. He also studied the statements of faith of six special-purpose or parachurch evangelical agencies; namely the 'Billy Graham Evangelistic Association', the 'National Association of Evangelicals', 'Christianity Today Incorporated', 'Campus Crusade for Christ', the 'InterVarsity Christian Fellowship' and 'Wheaton College'. Finally, he looked at the statement of faith of the 'International Congress on World Evangelization', an international evangelical movement in which Americans have paid an important part. The statements of faith of all the above affirmed that the Bible reflects the direct influence of God. It is the ultimate authority for beliefs and practices. They also agree on what they say about God. He is the only God and the creator of the universe. All the statements upheld the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. When speaking of Jesus they all agreed:

Jesus was born as a virgin without a human father through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit. As at once both God and human, Jesus lived a sinless life. His death on the cross was substitutionary and a sufficient payment for the penalty owed to God by the sins of humanity. After Jesus rose bodily from the dead, he ascended into heaven where he now resides at the right hand of the Father. In heaven Jesus continues to serve humanity by acting as a mediator and advocate for sinners within the counsels of the Trinity. At the end of time, Jesus will return to the earth, and this Second Coming will mark the ultimate and visible triumph of God as well as the end of the world as we have known it (2001, p. 60).

When it came to the Holy Spirit there was some divergence of opinions but all agreed that he dwells in Christian believers and strengthens them for life and service. With regard to humanity and human nature all affirmed mankind was created in the image of God for the purpose of enjoying fellowship with him. However, through Adam and Eve's disobedience to

God they brought judgment down on themselves and their descendants. As a result of humanity's sinfulness humans have been separated from God and are in need of salvation through Christ. Most said similar things about evangelization. It was considered a privilege and indeed essential to pass on the 'good news' about salvation through Christ. Almost all the statements mentioned the importance of living a godly life. All affirmed the church as Christ's body in the world. All that mentioned the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper said similar things about them.

In Noll's study of evangelical statements of belief the reality of a final judgment is frequently mentioned. Even those that do not mention it imply one takes place. Those that speak of it state that "at this last judgment the redeemed will remain forever with God while those who are not redeemed will be damned" (2001, p. 63). This is an important observation for the evaluation that follows. The 'Basis of Faith' of the Evangelical Alliance in the UK includes the statement: "The personal and visible return of Jesus Christ to fulfil the purposes of God, who will raise all people to judgement, bring eternal life to the redeemed and eternal condemnation to the lost, and establish a new heaven and new earth."

It has to be acknowledged that evangelicals do not agree on all subjects. Evangelicalism encompasses a broad spectrum of interpretations on a number of topics. An example of one such area would be that of biblicism. While all would agree that the Bible is trustworthy in all matters of faith and conduct, some would want to assert that in its original manuscript form it was inerrant. In a recent survey of evangelicals in the UK, conducted by the Evangelical Alliance and Christian Research, only 54% agreed a lot that the Bible, in its original manuscript, is without error, while 18% agreed a little, 14 % were unsure, 9% disagreed a little and 5% disagreed a lot (2011, p. 8). The same survey found that evangelicals in the UK had widely divergent views on issues such as abortion, assisted suicide, evolution, women in leadership, homosexuality and the nature of hell.

This section provides an overview of what is signified when I speak of evangelicalism. While there are many evangelical denominations, parachurch organizations and groupings, there is wide agreement between them on their core beliefs. I am going to use Bebbington's four key characteristics of evangelicalism as my benchmark in my analysis of MacDonald's and Greggs' universalist tendencies.

Defining Universalism

It is important to understand what I am referring to when I speak of 'universalism'. James Fowler (2004) in his online article writes:

There is much ambiguity in the popular usages of the term "universalism." The term has been used in the context of philosophy, sociology, religion, and elsewhere.

He identifies three general forms of universalism which he lists as philosophical universalism, pluralistic religious universalism and Christianized religious universalism (2004). Philosophical universalism involves the broadest concept of universalism. Some philosophers argue that all things are empowered and given meaning by a common source. This involves the concept that all is ultimately one despite the misleading appearance of differentiation. Eastern philosophers like the Neo-Confucian Chang Tsai (1020-77) were pantheists and argued everything is God. The Hindu Vivekananda (1863-1902) was a panentheist and argued everything is in God. These monistic concepts have been incorporated by some Westerners into their personal spiritualities. G. McCulloch points out that they are prevalent in feminist spiritualities (2002, p. 85). This is not the kind of universalism I am referring to in this thesis.

Fowler (2004) writes that pluralistic religious universalism is where the "broad concepts of philosophical universalism are transferred into religious universalism." This type of universalism assumes that all religions have equal validity because they are all judged to be leading to the same God and to the same destiny for mankind. Fowler (2004) states, "in the contemporary social climate of pluralism and tolerance of all variants, this form of pluralistic religious universalism is particularly appealing." Neither is this the kind of universalism I am focusing on in this essay.

The third category of universalism Fowler identifies is 'Christianized religious universalism'. He refuses to speak of it as 'Christian universalism' as he would consider such a title an oxymoron. Greggs and MacDonald would have no problem with the designation 'Christian universalism' as the following two quotes show. MacDonald writes, "Speaking for myself, I have no qualms about saying that I am a convinced universalist. I do believe that the proposition "God will save everyone through Christ" is a true proposition and consequently I think those who disagree are mistaken" (2011, p. 13). Greggs speaking in the conclusion of

his book entitled *Barth, Origen, and Universalism: Restoring Particularity*, writes, “This book has sought to articulate a form of Christian universalism which is genuinely *Christian* and which does not exist at the expense of particularity” (2009, p. 206). In the context of this essay ‘Christian universalism’ does not refer to the belief that Christ makes salvation available to all irrespective of their race, nation, economic situation or gender; the belief that Christ’s death on the cross provided a redemptive ransom for all people universally. Nor does it refer to the fact that God desires that all be saved. What it does refer to is the teaching that everyone, without exception, will find their place among the saved in heaven with God forever through the saving work of Christ. MacDonald argues that while Christian universalists will disagree at many points what they all have in common “is that the origin of the universalist impulse and the way it is worked out theologically are integrally Christian” (2008, p. 6). This Christian universalism is what I am referring to when I speak of universalism in this essay.

Why are some evangelicals beginning to write in defence of Christian universalism?

I want to explore what is currently motivating some evangelicals to hold a theological stance that has until the last ten years been considered the domain of more liberal theologians.

Rob Bell is an evangelical and until recently was the senior leader and founder of Mars Hill Bible Church, a large church in Grandville, Michigan. He has also been a keynote preacher at many large evangelical conferences. He is the speaker on a series of short films on DVD called ‘NOOMA’ that have been used as teaching aids in many evangelical churches. Bell is not an academic but nonetheless influential in Emergent Church circles. Bell raises a number of questions that reveal why he is sympathetic to Christian universalism. He asks:

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number “make it to a better place” and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God (2011, p. 2)?

For Bell the question is, ‘If God is really loving how can he allow anybody to suffer in torment forever?’ He goes on to ask why a decision made over a relatively short period of time should have eternal consequences (2011, p. 2). He suggests that God’s selection seems to rely on relatively random factors such as where a person is born or the family they belong

to. It could even depend on whether the youth pastor in the local church was effective at relating to the kids in his care (2011, p. 3). Is it fair that people who have never had the chance to hear the gospel should be lost eternally? Is it fair that those who shared the gospel with them did it so inefficiently that the hearer was alienated from the message? Bell asks whether it would not be better to prematurely terminate a child's life if they were at risk of denying Christ in later life, given the teaching that children up to a certain age are not held accountable for what they believe.(2011, p. 4).

As an evangelical pastor I have to acknowledge how difficult it is to share the gospel with a person who has lost a loved one who in their own life never expressed any interest in Christ or the salvation he offered. It is also extremely hard to conduct the funeral service for a person who died before professing faith in Christ. How can the family be offered any hope with regard to their lost family member? The focus of such services becomes God's offer of comfort to the living in their grief. Bell touches on the pain of such situations when he writes:

And then there are those whose lessons about heaven consist primarily of who *will* be there and who *won't* be there. And so there's a woman sitting in a church service with tears streaming down her face, as she imagines being reunited with her sister who was killed in a car accident seventeen years ago. The woman sitting next to her, however, is realizing that if what the pastor is saying about heaven is true, she will be separated from her mother and father, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends forever, with no chance of any reunion, ever. She in that very same moment has tears streaming down her face too, but they are tears of a different kind (2011, p. 25).

Gregory MacDonald's motivation for becoming a proponent of Christian universalism began when he read William Lane Craig's book entitled *Only Wise God*. Craig was writing in defence of a philosophical position known as Molinism. This position allows Christians "to affirm *both* that humans have free will *and* that God can still exercise strong providential control over our actions" (2008, p. 2). MacDonald then asked himself, "If God can allow us freedom and still ensure that he gets his will done, why is it that he allows anyone to go to hell" (2008, p. 2)? With this question began a long theological journey that resulted in him embracing Christian universalism.

Stephen Davis argues that the strongest five arguments for Christian universalism are (1990, p. 174-176):

- 1) The Bible implies that universalism is true. Many passages show that it is God's intention that everyone be reconciled to God. Other passages declare that the work of God's grace in Christ was designed for the salvation of everyone. Finally, some texts speak of God's victory being total and that ultimately everything will be reconciled to God.
- 2) If God is sovereign, and he wants no one to be eternally lost, then how can God's plan be thwarted?
- 3) How can a just God condemn people to eternal torment? Should not the punishment fit the crime?
- 4) How can those in heaven be joyful if they have friends and loved ones in hell?
- 5) What about those who die in total ignorance of Christ?

Although Davis is not persuaded by these arguments, such arguments must prove persuasive to some adherents of universalism. We will return to some of these arguments later when we evaluate the views of key evangelical proponents of Christian universalism.

Morwenna Ludlow points out that "since the concept of an eternal hell is based on the assumption of the justice of retributive punishment, recent debates about the nature of punishment, reflecting a growing interest in reformatory punishment and restorative justice, seem to have encouraged the move away from the idea of God imposing an eternal hell" (2009, p. 4). There is no doubt that today, in the Western World, punishment is increasingly seen as primarily a means of reform not retribution. It stands to reason that more will ask whether hell has any reformatory value.

The fact we now live in a multicultural and pluralist society means that we now live side by side with people of very different religious beliefs. Evangelicals in multicultural Western Society now daily live among adherents of other faiths, or none, who do not look to Christ for salvation. Ludlow writes, "the growing encounter with and knowledge of other religions has intensified the question of whether Christianity is the only means to salvation. Similarly, an increasingly secular world has forced believers to question the Church's traditional teaching about those who practice no religion at all" (2009, p. 4).

For Greggs Christian universalism helps counter the division and violence that often accompanies theologies that suggest some will be saved and others damned. He writes,

In an age in which terror is carried out reputedly in the name of God, and in which political rhetoric can conjure apocalyptic imagery and echo separationist views of eschatology, applying them all too easily to present groups within society, the need for the Christian theologian to confront the question of the scope of salvation is pressing. As a servant discipline, Christian theology must be alert to the reality that the separationism that underscores unhelpful theo-political thought and speech comes from within faith communities, and that articulations of Christian particularity in certain ecclesiastical rhetoric can be responsible for prejudice, superiority, and enmity with regard to the other, who can come to be seen as a damnable being destined for all eternity to be alienated from God. It is to this age, in which Christianity finds itself confronted by secularity and religious plurality, that the present book wishes to speak (2009, p. vii).

Some might argue that a sense of hopelessness when it comes to world evangelization has been a factor in the increasing popularity of Christian universalism. Admittedly, there has been incredible growth of the Christian church in places like central and Southern Africa and South America. However, Christianity has gone through steep decline in Western Europe. Steve Bruce, writing on church membership in Britain, says,

In 1800 some 18 per cent of the adult population was in church membership. In 1850 it was 27 per cent. In 1900 it was 26 per cent. Set against those figures, I can see no reason to describe the subsequent changes over the twentieth century (21 per cent in 1940; 10 per cent in 2000) as anything other than decline (2002, p. 67).

The countries with the largest populations (i.e. China and India) still have a relatively low percentage of Christians. Countries in the Middle East and North Africa are notoriously difficult to evangelize because many Muslim countries forbid Christians to share their faith with Muslims. The task of reaching all with the gospel is enormous in a world that now contains more than 7 billion people. It is no wonder that some evangelicals are drawn to universalism. Although Davis rejects universalism he says, "Let me confess that I would deeply like universalism to be true" (1990, p. 178).

Postmodernism is bound to be a factor in the increasing support of Christian universalism by evangelicals. Postmodernism is dismissive of all stories that claim to be true for all people in all places at all times (meta-narratives). David Harvey writes, "Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses (to use the favoured phrase) are the hallmark of postmodernist thought" (1990, p. 9). The traditional teaching on hell and eternal punishment is one such meta-narrative. Postmodernism sees all

truth claims as subjective. They are considered the result of an individual's personal experience but cannot be proved to be true for all. Robert Sellers writes:

They (postmodernists) argue that it is impossible to make definitively "knowledgeable" pronouncements because each person's "truth" is determined by how he or she perceives and expresses it. Truth, then, no longer necessarily corresponds to the world "out there." Thus, propositions are not the exclusive, or even the dominant, proof of our knowing; instead, they now have "second-order importance" (2003, p. 645).

Any suggestion that only those that have a personal faith in Christ will be saved, in a postmodern culture, is likely to be interpreted as intolerant in the extreme. Gene Veith writes, "It is hard to witness to truth to people who believe that truth is relative" (1994, p. 16). He goes on to draw attention to the fact that a recent poll in America has found that 52% of those describing themselves as *evangelical Christians* believe that there are no absolutes. Christian universalism offers a way to salvation for members of all faiths. However, it must be stressed that Bell, Macdonald and Greggs all uphold a particularist form of universalism. Christ is always seen as the means of salvation.

Evangelical Adherents of Christian Universalism:

1) Rob Bell

In 2011 Rob Bell's most recent book, *Love Wins* (Harper Collins, 2011), was published. The New York Times describes him, in the foreword of his book as "a central figure for his generation and for the way that evangelicals are likely to do church in the next 20 years." Although he does not openly claim to be a Universalist he does, in *Love Wins*, show incredible sympathy for Christian universalism. His orientation is clear when he writes:

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chances for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear (2011, p. viii).

Bell's book is not an academic work so I do not want to spend too long analyzing what he has written. His thoughts are significant because they are symptomatic of some

evangelicals' increased openness to the Christian universalist position. For Bell the key question he asks is (2011, p. 97), "So does God get what God wants?" This question is asked against the backdrop of 1 Timothy 2:3-4 (New Revised Standard Version) which says, "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Bell never clearly states his own position but rather outlines the positions that others have held; positions that would be considered by the vast majority of evangelical Christians as unorthodox. Bell seems very sympathetic to the argument that says that all are free to reject God's love but God's love is so great that it might ultimately prove irresistible. He is open to the possibility that God will pursue an individual even after death for as long as it takes for them to yield to his love. He sees the ultimate goal of God as restoration, reconciliation and renewal for all. God will search until all the lost are found. Hell is not forever but a temporary state. It is not a separate place from heaven but a self-imposed rejection of God's love. Such a position Bell appears to see as being most glorifying to God. Speaking of those that have held such unorthodox perspectives he writes:

Central to their trust that all would be reconciled was the belief that untold masses of people suffering forever doesn't bring God glory. Restoration brings God glory; eternal torment doesn't. Reconciliation brings God glory; endless anguish doesn't. Renewal and return cause God's greatness to shine through the universe; never-ending punishment doesn't.

To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts (2011, p. 108).

Mark Galli considers Bell's statement of an 'untold number' of devout Christians quite misleading. He writes, "Well, only a tiny minority of Christians have espoused it in 20 centuries. The church has consistently rejected it because the arguments for it have never been compelling" (2011a, May).

Bell has undoubtedly introduced the possibility of universalism as a way of making Jesus more attractive to those who would otherwise reject him on the basis of the orthodox doctrine of hell and eternal punishment. Greg Downes summarises Bell's approach in the following way (2011, May, p. 30), "Bell's motive for moving to a universalist perspective, he

claims, is missional. He declares that the classic understanding of hell turns many away from Christ. So what's the concern, if adopting a universalist view solves a thorny theological problem?" Bell's approach may deal with the thorny issue of a supposedly loving God creating people who he knows will reject him and spend eternity in a conscious torment, but in solving one problem it creates more. These we will consider later.

Galli points out that Scripture leaves us with a mystery over how God's love, justice and omnipotence will be reconciled at the end of history but writes, "The fact that Scripture refuses to solve the dilemma should give us pause" (2011a, May). The significance of what Bell has written has, however, been understood by Galli. He writes, "On his way to making Jesus more attractive to unbelievers, Bell has raised crucial questions that evangelicals have been whispering about for some time" (2011a, May).

2) Gregory MacDonald (pseudonym for Robin Parry)

Robin Parry originally worked as a teacher and then became the Editorial Director for Paternoster. Today he is an Acquisitions Editor for Wipf and Stock. He has authored a number of theological books and co-edited a number of others. Under the pen name of Gregory MacDonald he has written *The Evangelical Universalist* (SPCK, 2008) and edited *All Shall Be Well* (James Clarke & Co, 2011).

Today, MacDonald is a convinced Christian universalist. He believes that all will be saved through a personal faith in Christ. While some will be saved in this life he believes others will only be saved after death. Those who reject Christ's offer of salvation before death will go to hell where they will suffer the consequences of their sin until they come to their senses, repent of their sin, and receive salvation. All will eventually find Christ's offer of salvation irresistible and freely choose to follow him, so all will ultimately be saved. For MacDonald hell is not eternal conscious torture but temporary conscious torture. The church is to be a demonstration in the here and now of what awaits everyone in the future. MacDonald writes of the church,

Our calling is to act as a prophetic sign to the nations representing the destiny of all humanity. When people look at the church, God wants them to see a vision of what redeemed humanity can be – what it will be (2008, 167).

If we think back to 'Bebbington's Quadrilateral' of evangelicalism I believe that MacDonald's position is conversionist and crucicentric but I question the extent of its biblicism and its impact on evangelical activism. MacDonald's theology demands that individuals make a personal choice to follow Christ and that salvation comes only through what Christ achieved on the cross. However, below I will outline why it is not true to the message of the Bible and does not encourage Christians to be as active in propagating the Gospel.

I want to begin by evaluating MacDonald's biblical arguments for Christian universalism. He writes in his book, *The Evangelical Universalist*, "This book is an attempt to argue that universalism has strong claims to being well grounded in biblical revelation" (2008, p. 41). Even before MacDonald begins his biblical arguments in defence of universalism he makes the following admissions, "... all Christians are prepared to tolerate some problematic texts without surrendering their beliefs" (2008, p. 37) and "... when I claim that universalism is biblical, I do *not* mean that all biblical authors were universalists but that universalist tendencies of some authors provide the big picture within which we can happily accommodate the teachings on hell of all the biblical writers" (2008, p. 40). These are big admissions to make at the beginning of an argument claiming universalism is well-grounded in biblical revelation. MacDonald believes the Bible's teaching only strongly contradicts universalism if the Bible teaches that hell lasts forever (2008, p. 37) so that is one key area his writing addresses.

MacDonald spends a chapter of *The Evangelical Universalist* looking at the Old Testament evidence for universalism. He emphasises that through Adam's sin all the nations were exiled (put out of the Garden of Eden). Abraham and his descendants Israel were chosen to point the nations to the one true God, Yahweh. Since Israel also fell into idolatry and rejected the one true God they too were exiled. Israel had to be saved by a messiah before they could play their part in the restoration of the nations. MacDonald believes the Old Testament teaches that all the survivors of the divine judgements will eventually choose to worship Yahweh. He says that the kind of universalism found in the Old Testament is, "One in which ultimately all humanity without exception acknowledges the universal sovereignty of Yahweh and worships him" (2008, p. 72). He does not believe that the Old Testament teaches the salvation of each and every individual who has ever lived since it has no

conception of life after death until the very end of the Old Testament period. Therefore it is not universal in the strong sense of the word.

One passage he focuses on in the Old Testament is Isaiah 45:20-25. MacDonald believes that this passage clearly speaks of a time when all those living will choose to worship Yahweh. Firstly, He argues that the oath of the nations has been taken in the context of God's call to be saved. Secondly, he believes that the swearing of oaths in Yahweh's name was something only his own people do, not Yahweh's enemies. Thirdly, he states that the confession in verse 24 sounds like the cry of praise from God's own people. For me this passage speaks of an offer of salvation that goes out to all. Yahweh will one day be recognised as the one true God and his attributes acknowledged by all but this will be a forced submission for some. Those who resent his lordship will be put to shame. The 'descendants of Israel' who will be found righteous in verse 25 are all those who have freely chosen to worship Yahweh. MacDonald argues that the contrast in verses 24 and 25 is between the nations who are ashamed of their past idolatry and restored Israel. I would argue that the contrast is between those who refuse God's lordship and those who embrace it. My interpretation of this passage is shared by Alec Motyer in his commentary on Isaiah. Motyer believes there will be a universal submission to God expressed by knee and tongue, but although all will submit not all will turn savingly to the Lord. While some will trust God wholly for their salvation, others will still harbour rage in their hearts and will go away into shame. Motyer argues that those called 'the descendants of Israel' represent the worldwide confessing community (1999, p. 292).

When it comes to the New Testament, MacDonald argues that Jesus is to be seen as the 'Servant of Israel' and the 'Second Adam'. As the 'Servant of Israel' he represented Israel and as the 'Second Adam' he represented all humanity. His death and resurrection was considered by MacDonald as being a means of restoring an exiled Israel and an exiled humanity from the curse of their sin. In order to support his scheme, MacDonald claims that some of the Jews during Christ's life on earth still considered themselves to be in exile even though under Cyrus they had been restored to their God-given land. MacDonald bases this on the observations of Wright. Wright quotes 1st Century Jewish writings and concludes that the exile was not over in Jewish minds until the Gentiles were put in their place, the Temple fully restored and the blessings promised by the prophets had fully taken place (see 1992, p.

270). MacDonald sees the church as being a witness to all today of the salvation that awaits all in the future.

The present age is one in which humanity, both Jew and Gentile, is divided into elect and non-elect, saved and perishing. However, the church is a sign in the present of the future day when all Israel will be saved and all the nations will come in pilgrimage to worship Yahweh and His Messiah(2008, p. 105).

I would agree that Jesus is the 'Second Adam' and the 'Servant of Israel' who has come to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles to God, but I would not agree that salvation awaits all. Individuals need to respond in faith to Christ in this life and the church is responsible for pointing individuals to this need.

MacDonald uses many of the New Testament passages that have traditionally been put forward to support Christian universalism. Space does not allow us to look in detail at all the arguments he makes from these passages but let us take a brief look at each:

1) Romans 5:12-21

MacDonald states that these verses, "aim to show that Christ's redemption is as wide as sin's corruption in that it reaches everyone ... Christ's act of righteous obedience on the cross totally reverses the results of Adam's act of disobedience in Eden" (2008, p. 79). I would argue that Christ offers a way of salvation for all but not all receive it. Paul's judgement passages (see passages like 2 Thess. 1:8-9 and Rom. 2:12) make it clear that he expects some to be saved and some to be condemned. N. T. Wright writes,

If we were to maintain, on the basis of the word 'all' in Romans 5 and 11, that Paul was a universalist, we would do so in the teeth of (eg) Romans 2:6-16, 14:11-12 and such other passages as 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10. Nor will it do to say that Paul had not thought through the implications of Romans 5: the epistle is far too tight-knit for that (1978, p. 55).

MacDonald claims that judgement and salvation are not mutually exclusive and I will come to his arguments on that later. Moo speaking about verse eighteen offers this view. He writes,

Paul wants to show, not how Christ has made *available* righteousness and life for all, but how Christ has secured the benefits of that righteousness for all who belong to him.

In this last phrase, we touch on what is the most likely explanation of Paul's language in this verse. Throughout the passage, Paul's concern to maintain parallelism between Adam and Christ has led him to choose terms that will clearly express this. In vv. 15 and 19, he uses "the many"; here he uses "all people." But in each case, Paul's point is not so much that the groups affected by Christ and Adam, respectively, are coextensive, but that Christ affects those who are his just as certainly as Adam does those who are his. When we ask who belongs to, or is "in," Adam and Christ, respectively, Paul makes his answer clear; every person, without exception, is "in Adam" (cf. vv. 12d-14); but only those who "receive the gift" (v. 17; "those who believe," according to Rom. 1:16-5:11) are "in Christ" (1996, p. 343).

John Ziesler commentating on Romans 5:18 writes,

Ought we to take 'for all men' strictly? Is Paul saying that all people, without exception, will be justified and find life? In view of other passages where he speaks of those who are perishing (e.g. Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 10:6-12), we should probably take him to be talking not about all men and women without qualification, but about all people in Christ. However this is not to deny that acquittal and life are intended to be available (1989, p. 151).

MacDonald would agree that only those "in Christ" are saved but it is his view that one day all will be "in Christ", but for some this will be after a purifying term in hell. He has to prove that hell is not eternal and post-mortem evangelism is possible.

2) 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

MacDonald believes that vv. 22-23 have nothing to say to those who are currently not believers but that this does not rule out universalism. He argues that the focus of this passage is believers. He does, however, see evidence for universalism in the future subjection of all things to Christ spoken of in the latter part of this passage. MacDonald argues that the Principalities and Powers, sin and death are rendered powerless at the end of the age to harm humanity. Gordon Fee, in contrast, sees in this passage the destruction of death through the resurrection for those who are believers, not the whole of humanity. He writes,

As long as people die, God's own sovereign purposes are not yet fully realized. Hence the necessity of the resurrection – so as to destroy death by "robbing" it of its store of those who do not belong to it because they belong to Christ (1987, p. 757)!

C. K. Barrett writes about Paul's declaration that death will be the last enemy that will be brought to nought:

Paul uses the word to mean not so much 'to annihilate' as 'to rob of efficacy'; it is accordingly arguable that even after this point death continues to exist, no longer as an effective enemy (to God) but as an instrument in his hand, which could be used, for example, against those whom God saw fit to punish (1971, p. 358).

Clearly Barrett still considers death harmful after this point to those God sees fit to punish.

3) Colossians 1:15-20

This passage is a poem and MacDonald says this about it:-

What is of interest from a universalistic perspective is that the poem is quite unambiguous about the extent of the reconciliation Christ has effected through his cross. The "all things" that are reconciled in v. 20 are, without any doubt, the same "all things" that are created in v. 16. In other words, every single created thing. It is not "all without distinction" (i.e., some of every kind of thing) but "all without exception" (i.e., every single thing in creation) (2008, p. 45).

N. T. Wright points out that, "Paul clearly believed that it was possible for human beings to reject God's offer of salvation, and that at the last judgement some having done so, would thereby be themselves rejected (see Rom. 1:18-2:16; 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thes. 1:5-10) (1986, p. 77). Wright suggests that Paul is here "emphasizing the universal *scope* of God's reconciling purposes; nothing less than a total new creation is envisaged" (1986, p. 77). R. Wilson interprets the 'all things' as all the powers hostile to man. He writes,

All the powers hostile to man – sin, death, the Law, the demonic agencies – were vanquished on the Cross, so that now there is peace The whole universe has been at war with itself, and Christ has brought peace into man's life because he has reconciled all (things), destroying those mysterious forces which have everywhere caused disunion (2005, p. 156).

MacDonald would argue that individuals can be rejected by God on judgement day but later saved. For this he has to prove that suffering in hell is not eternal. He would disagree that the "all things" in v. 20 refers to a total new creation rather than that all will one day be saved.

4) Philippians 2:5-11

MacDonald draws our attention to two things at the climax of this hymn. Firstly he wants to point out that the acknowledgment of Christ is universal and secondly that it is a vision of universal salvation. His first point, he admits, is not controversial. Most agree that the living

and the dead will one day bow the knee before Christ. However, his second point is controversial. He argues that this passage's background in Isaiah 45, and the confession itself, strongly supports that this is not a forced confession on the part of some, but that all will willingly and wholeheartedly make it one day. Gordon Fee totally disagrees with MacDonald. He acknowledges this passage's background in Isaiah 45 and sees this passage's significance in the fact that God has transferred his right of obeisance to the Son through his resurrection and ascension. Fee writes, "There is in this language no hint that those who bow are acknowledging his salvation; on the contrary they *will* bow to his sovereignty at the End, even if they are not now yielding to it" (1995, p. 224). William Hendriksen similarly argues that all three classes of intelligent beings (i.e., those in heaven, those on earth and those under the earth) will worship Christ at his return because his glory will be so great "that all will feel impelled to render homage to him" (1962, p. 115). J. I. Packer points out that Philippians 2:9 is juxtaposed with Philippians 3:19 where Paul speaks explicitly of some whose end is destruction (1973, p. 7).

MacDonald also focuses on Romans 9-11 (2008, p. 90-97) and argues that these chapters teach that at the Parousia all of the nation of Israel will be saved and suggests that this may trigger a fuller salvation for the Gentiles. I believe these chapters hint at a time in the future when there will be a widespread turning to Christ by the Jews before Christ's return. This revival amongst the Jews is said to take place when the full number of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25) so it seems unlikely it would lead to a fuller salvation for the Gentiles. Douglas Moo writes about this verse, "... that the Gentiles' 'fullness' involves a numerical completion: God has determined to save a certain number of gentiles, and only when that number has been reached will Israel's hardening be removed" (1996, p. 719).

MacDonald makes much of the fact that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). He sees this as a claim about God's very essence (2008, p. 103). He argues that all of God's actions must be compatible with his love. He writes,

But 1 John 4 will not allow us to conceive of any of God's actions being incompatible with his love. Consequently, any account of hell must see hell as a manifestation of divine love and mercy even if it is a severe side of that mercy. The traditional theologian will not allow that it is possible for those in hell to find salvation; but, I ask, how is that teaching compatible with the kind of divine love revealed in the biblical story? How could God be love if he draws a line at death and says, "Beyond

this point I will look for the lost sheep no more; and even if they do return, I shall turn them away.” It seems to me that such a God would not be behaving in a loving way (2008, p. 104).

Should human finite reasoning on what God’s love is like decide the issue with regard to the lost in hell? Arthur Climenhaga writes.

... the new universalist bases his doctrine of eternal destiny on a development of the concept of God as a God of love. Equating divine love with human love, he patterns God after man. If man would not confine any human being, no matter how perverse, to eternal suffering, neither purportedly is God capable of such retribution (2004, p. 9-10).

If it is true that God is utterly transcendent, and we can only know of God what he chooses to reveal to us, are we not better to rely on what is revealed in his inspired word than create a system that appears to have little support from Scripture? Should our reasoning transcend God’s revelation? Christian universalism is a system that has been created to satisfy our own lowly understanding of love.

MacDonald devotes a whole chapter of his book, *The Evangelical Universalist*, to examining the Book of Revelation. He argues that this biblical book adds weight to the argument that the prophecies in the Old Testament about the nations coming to worship God are not exhausted in the church but await a future fulfilment. There are two key passages in the Book of Revelation which are considered a major problem to universalistic or annihilationist interpretations. These passages are 14:9-11 and 20:10-15. MacDonald argues that the structure of Revelation means that neither of these passages can be separated from the salvation passages that follow them i.e. 15:2-4 and chapters 21-22. These passages, he believes, clearly give a place in the New Creation for the nations post-rebellion and post-damnation. He argues that the ‘the nations’ here do not refer to those saved from amongst the nations but to the nations that have been at enmity with God. He writes,

In the book of Revelation, the nations are created by God and ought to worship him (4:11); instead, they rebel against him. The Beast is given authority over them (13:7b). They partake in the sins of the world-city Babylon and thus also in her judgement (14:8; 17:15; 18:3, 23; 16:19). John is called to prophesy against the nations (10:11), and, just prior to Babylon’s final destruction, a final gospel call to repentance goes out to the nations (14:6) – a call they do not heed. Under the deceptive influence of Satan and the Beast, the nations persecute God’s people (11:12). When Satan is bound in the millennium, he can no longer deceive the

nations (20:3). But afterwards, he raises them for the final battle against the saints (20:8). Consequently they are the objects of God's eschatological wrath (11:8; 12:5; 19:15) (2008, p. 111).

These will come and worship before God (15:4 and 21:26), walk by the light of the New Jerusalem (21:24) and be healed by the fruits of the tree of life (22:2). In contrast to MacDonald, Grant Osborne writes this in commentary on 15:4,

The theme of the conversion of the nations and the procession of the nations to Jerusalem is frequent in the OT. ... For the OT the coming of the nations to Zion was final proof of the glory and might of Yahweh, and this theme is central to the Apocalypse as well. Of course this does not imply universalism for most among the nations will refuse to repent (Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9, 11) and will face final judgement (20:13-14) (2002, p. 568).

Stephen Smalley points to the fact that there was confidence that in the coming messianic age the nations of the world would worship the God of Israel and bring glory to his name. He cites such passages as Ps. 86:9, Mal. 1:11 and Rom 15:8-12. He believes that the seer has here transformed them into an assertion of God's total sovereignty over the beast and his followers at the end of time. He states that not all will repent (Rev. 22:11, 15) but the universal opportunity will always exist (6:15-17; 7:14; 22:11) (see 2005, p. 388-389). This passage certainly does not require a universalist interpretation.

MacDonald sees a universalist hope in chapters 21-22 of Revelation. He points out that chapter 21:12-21 contain a very detailed description of the walls of the New Jerusalem. Why are the walls needed? They are not there to defend the city from its enemies as there are no enemies to attack it. This is made clear by the fact that the gates are left open at all times (21:25). MacDonald suggests that the wall is there to form a boundary between the redeemed inside the city and those who inhabit the lake of fire outside the city. He believes this is supported by the demarcation that is spoken of in 22:14-15. At first glance MacDonald acknowledges this appears to undermine the universalist position but then he draws attention to 21:23-27 which appear to suggest the nations will enter it. He writes: "Now we have a vision in which the nations, whom we have already established have been thrown into the lake of fire, enter the New Jerusalem via the permanently open gates" (2008, p. 115). MacDonald suggests that "... the open doors are not just a symbol of security

but primarily a symbol of the God who excludes no one from his presence forever” (2008, p. 115).

David Aune points out that city gates were never closed in the day. They were only closed at night, when it was dark. Maybe we are told the gates were never locked because the light from God and the Lamb never made it necessary (1998, p. 1172-1173). Hendriksen interprets the open gates of the Holy City as illustrating the fact that before the coming of the new heaven and earth there had been “abundant opportunity to enter by faith into the blessed fellowship with God” (1962, p. 205). He also points out that each gate is guarded by an angel (21:12) so that the unclean, whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life, cannot enter. James Resseguie writes of the unlocked doors,

The unlocked doors of the city symbolize evil’s absence from the new creation. Evil no longer lurks outside the city gates, making it necessary to bolt the doors to protect the city’s inhabitants. This is an inviting city in which the gates are open, for fear and threats no longer exist (2009, p. 256-257).

Robert Mounce believes that the reference to the ‘nations’ in 21:24 is because “John has taken over verbally from the prophets language and figures of speech which presuppose the continuance of Gentile peoples on the earth after the establishment of the eschatological era” (1977, p. 385). The prophets envisaged a future which resembled our present life on earth. John makes use of their visions but applies them to the eternal plane. In the process of doing this he occasionally retains words that are not entirely appropriate to this new setting. Mounce writes, “The imagery of the Apocalypse must of necessity be concrete and spatial, but its significance is inevitably spiritual” (1977, p. 385). Resseguie, speaking of the same passage writes,

The nations walk by the city’s light and the kings bring their glory into Jerusalem (21:24). This comment is somewhat surprising since the “kings of the earth” are hostile to God and the Lamb’s followers in other references (6:15; 16:14; 17:2, 18:3, 9; 19:19). But as Aune notes “nations” and “kings” are in synonymous parallelism, and in 5:9 and 7:9 the Lamb redeems people from the “every nation.” The nations and kings are likely those who have “broken the shackles of deception and enslavement” to Babylon and the beast and have decided to follow the Lamb to the new promised land (2009, p. 257).

Again, there are good alternative and traditional interpretations for the passages MacDonald uses to put forward his universalist views.

MacDonald's focus then moves to the New Testament's teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul on Hell. He points to the fact that about 25% of the Synoptic teaching of Jesus is about final punishment. Jesus used striking terms to speak of the coming judgement. MacDonald writes,

He spoke of fire (Matt 5:22; 18:8, 9, 45, 47), of "eternal fire" (Matt 18:45, 47; 25:41), an unquenched fire that would not go out (Mark 9:48). Jesus refers to the place where the fire burns as Gehenna (Matt 23:33). It is a place of judgement (Matt 12:41-42), condemnation (Matt 23:33), 'eternal punishment' (Matt 25:46), and divine wrath (Matt 3:7, 12; Luke 3:7, 17). Sometimes Jesus spoke in the imagery of expulsion to "outer darkness," where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 24:51) (2008, p. 143).

MacDonald identifies Gehenna as a place of rejection, destruction by fire and involving a just punishment for the wicked. He believes that the imagery is adopted from Isaiah 66:24 and primarily referred to a state of condemnation that was to be avoided at all costs. MacDonald acknowledges that, "Few, if any, of Jesus contemporary listeners would have understood his words as leaving any room for hope for those who find themselves in Gehenna, ..." (2008, p. 144). He does, however, believe that the concept of Gehenna was broad enough to speak of a place of punishment and fire but beyond that was generally left unexplained. He states that Jesus' contemporaries would not have thought for one moment that Jesus was a universalist. MacDonald does not believe Jesus taught universalism or that those in Gehenna could or would be saved. This is where the traditionalists would rest their case. The fact that Jesus, who taught so much about the coming judgement, never spoke of any variety of universalism or gave any hope for those who found themselves in Gehenna, must be a very strong argument against universalism from a biblical perspective. MacDonald admits he can only attempt to show that what Jesus did teach does not formally contradict universalist claims (2008, p. 145)

MacDonald states that there are two particular Gospel passages that have been used to illustrate the point that Jesus explicitly teaches eternal punishment in hell. MacDonald denies that these passages do in fact teach eternal punishment. The first is the story of 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' found in Luke 16. In 16:26 it states that a gulf has been fixed between Hades and Abraham's side that no one can cross. MacDonald argues that Jesus' teaching here disagrees with what he says about judgement elsewhere. Elsewhere he teaches that

judgement will come at the end of the age and here it is presented as coming immediately after death. It is therefore argued that Jesus is here using a commonly known story to make a different point. His focus is not at all on the afterlife. Since the gulf spoken of here takes place between death and the final judgement it may not be fixed beyond this period. Since in Luke 16:14 the Pharisees are the ones who are described as loving money, it is argued that the rich man in the story represents the Pharisees. MacDonald suggests that in this passage the focus is wealth and poverty not the afterlife. The pseudo piety of the Pharisees is lampooned because they end up where they expect the unclean to go and vice versa. Leon Morris does not agree that this story has nothing to teach us about the afterlife. He believes that the pictorial detail of the 'great chasm ... fixed' clearly shows that there is no passing from one state to the other. He points to the fact that Jewish writings speak similarly of a permanent separation in the afterlife. He quotes 1 Enoch 22:9. Joseph Fitzmyer speaks of 'a great chasm' as being "an unbridgeable gulf between the locale of bliss and that of torment" (2010, p. 1133). J. Norval Geldenhuys, commenting on 16:26 writes:

During the life on earth the rich man and the beggar had the opportunity of choosing, and on that choice their fate in the hereafter absolutely depended. After death the time of grace is past – their fate has been sealed finally and forever, and no communication is possible between those who are lost and those who are saved (1950, p. 426).

In my opinion Luke 16:26 does contain significant teaching on the afterlife.

The second passage that MacDonald says has been commonly used to illustrate that Jesus taught eternal punishment is the account of 'The Sheep and the Goats' found in Matthew 25:31-46. Two fates are set in parallel: eternal life and eternal punishment. It is argued by the traditionalist that "eternal" cannot mean one thing when applied to life and something quite different when applied to punishment. The traditionalist would see this as case closed but Macdonald suggests not. For MacDonald the key question is how we translate the Greek word '*aionios*'. Some want to translate it as 'everlasting' whilst MacDonald prefers the translation 'pertaining to an age'. He sees the 'age' referred to as, more often than not, the age to come, and points to Hebrews 6:2 and 9:12. He writes:

Thus "eternal life" may be better translated as "the life of the age to come" and "eternal punishment" as "the punishment of the age to come". But if this is so, then it is no longer obvious that the punishment is everlasting. True, the age to come is

everlasting, but that does not necessitate that the punishment of the age to come lasts for the duration of that age, simply that it occurs during that age and is appropriate for that age (2008, p. 147-148).

R.T. France in commenting on this account of the last judgement does acknowledge the two possible interpretations of *'aionios'*. He does not rule out the possibility that the lost will be annihilated rather than consciously suffering forever, but he gives no place for post-mortem salvation. He writes: "Throughout this passage there have been only two classes of people, the blessed and the cursed, those 'for' and those 'against' (cf. 12:30). So now there are only two destinies (cf. Dn. 12:2)" (1985, p. 358).

MacDonald contends that Jesus says nothing that rules out the possibility of universalism although he admits that Jesus nowhere explicitly teaches universalism. He argues that Jesus' main concern was to emphasise the need to avoid hell at all costs. MacDonald believes his silence on the issue of universalism helps achieve this. MacDonald goes on to state what he believes Gehenna must be like, given that God is a God of love. He writes:

Any interpretation of Gehenna must be compatible with the claim that God is love and would never act in a way towards a person that was not ultimately compatible with what is best for that person. Any interpretation of Gehenna as a punishment must be compatible with the claim that divine punishment is more than retributive but has a corrective intention as well (for divine punishment of the sinner must be compatible with, and an expression of, God's love for that sinner). Any interpretation of Gehenna must be compatible with God's ultimate triumph over sin and the fulfilment of his loving purpose of redeeming all his creatures (2008, p. 148).

For me the observation that Jesus speaks so much about hell but never gives a hint that there is any possibility of salvation for those who have been sent there is very significant. MacDonald's argument is an argument from silence. It is not in character for Jesus to withhold the truth on any subject. He could have spelt out the horrors of hell and told people it was to be avoided at all costs even if there was ultimately salvation for all. The horror of having to endure hell would have been deterrent enough. He does not talk of a hope beyond hell because there is none.

MacDonald has to find a satisfactory solution to the passages that seem to imply that hell involves an eternal, conscious punishment. There are images such as "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mk. 9:48 [New International Version]), and "the smoke of their torment that rises for ever and ever" (Rev. 14:11 [New International Version]).

When MacDonald considers the teachings of Paul on hell, he acknowledges that Paul clearly sees humanity divided into two groups: those who are being saved and those who are perishing (2 Cor. 2:14-17; 1 Cor. 1:18). He presents eternal life and wrath as alternative destinies at the end of the age. MacDonald argues that Paul does not mitigate his warnings as it would not be in his interests to do so. He does not want to weaken his argument. However, it could be argued that Paul would have made God appear more attractive by speaking of the fact that all would be ultimately saved. It could be argued that this might have caused more to put their faith in Christ. Rob Bell believes the doctrine of Christian universalism makes Christianity more appealing. Would that not have been true for Paul as well. If he knew Christian universalism to be true teaching it may have caused the Gospel to spread more quickly. My argument is that he did not teach it because he knew it was not true. As I have already made clear, MacDonald believes that in some contexts Paul makes apparent universalist claims, but I believe these can all be interpreted in ways that uphold eternal conscious suffering awaits the lost. MacDonald cites times when Paul limits the division between the saved and the perishing (1 Cor. 5:1-5 and 6:9-11) but I consider these examples to relate to those who turned to Christ in this life, not after death.

MacDonald admits that 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 is a problem text for universalists. He says that at first glance it does appear to teach that the damnation of sinners is irreversible. Where the 'New International Version' translates the Greek as 'They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord', he suggests that an equally viable translation is 'They will be punished with the ruin of the age to come that comes from the presence of the Lord'. This translation he believes leaves room for post-mortem redemption for those in hell. Leon Morris writes,

The adjective "eternal" means literally "age-long," and everything depends on the length of the age. In the New Testament there is never a hint that the coming age has an end – it is the continuing life of the world to come. When the life of believers beyond the grave is spoken of it is with the use of this same adjective. "Eternal life" is that life which belongs to the age to come. Therefore it has no end (1959, p. 205-206).

It seems more logical to me to assume "eternal destruction" is unending if "eternal life" is clearly without end. The same can be said of the Matthew 25:31-46 passage.

It is obvious that MacDonald has a high regard for the authority of Scripture. He attempts to base his brand of universalism on what the Bible teaches. However, there are viable traditional interpretations for the passages he has used to uphold his universalist position. These traditional interpretations do not contradict the wider contexts of these passages and do not rely on crude proof-texting. Robert Gundry writes "... settling for "tension" between supposedly universalist texts and obviously non-universalistic texts amounts to ignoring the first rule of interpretation: Take account of the context" (2011, p. 49). Climenhaga believes that today's Christian universalists build their theology on "a fragmented usage of Scripture, not on an exposition of the Scripture in total wholeness and context. Scriptures used to buttress claims of universal redemption, when taken in the total context of the scripture passage, or when juxtaposed with contextual Scriptures which clearly imply that some perish, can be shown to have a different meaning entirely "(2004, p. 8). Jesus, who teaches so extensively on the judgement to come never says anything that explicitly supports universalism. Very narrow translations of certain key Greek words have to be maintained just to allow the slender possibility of universalism. Gundry draws attention to Matthew 7:13-14 where Jesus makes an explicit statement in his Sermon on the Mount that "wide is the gate and broad the way leading to destruction, and many are the ones that enter through it" (2011, p. 49).

One of Bebbington's four major traits of evangelicalism is activism. I am here considering the impact of universalism on evangelical activism. It is MacDonald's belief that "Christian universalists share with non-universalists many of their motivations for gospel proclamation: to obey Christ's command, to save people from the coming wrath, to bring them into living fellowship with the triune God and his church" (2008, p. 168). MacDonald argues that Christian universalists will also be uniquely inspired to share the gospel by the desire to see the longed for day when every knee will bow and every tongue worship God. Their motivation is to see the glorious destiny described in Ephesians 1:10 and Colossians 1:20 become a reality. Many have, however, contended that the Christian universalist position undermines the imperative to preach the gospel. Packer writes,

If all men are, in the words of a last-century tract title, "doomed to be saved," then present decision is no longer really decisive, and the urgency of evangelism is taken away. The way is then open to argue that other methods of loving one's neighbour

than seeking to win him to faith in Jesus Christ should take priority, and thus to advocate a shift from seeking conversions to giving social aid and relief (1973, p. 4).

Davis writes about universalists, "... if they act on their belief they will feel no urgent need to evangelize" (1990, p. 185). It certainly cannot be denied that universalism reduces the imperative for evangelism that goes with the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment for those who do not respond in faith to Christ in this life. Greg Downes makes the point that where there is a heaven to inherit and a hell to escape the motivation to evangelise is greatest (2011, p. 30). He quotes Romans 10:14-15 to illustrate the urgency of mission (2011, p. 32). MacDonald is, however, right to assert that the Christian universalism he advocates still has some good reasons for sharing the gospel. The imperative to do evangelism may be less but the need is still there. As Packer suggests above, it could be argued that Christian universalism leads to a greater activism in certain areas. If sharing the gospel is seen as less urgent then Christians may participate more in social action and giving to the poor. Action may begin to overtake words in Christian mission.

I think MacDonald is right to suggest that within traditional evangelical circles preaching on the eternal fires of hell is far less common than it was and so the emphasis on doing evangelism to rescue the damned from eternal conscious torment is not what it once was (2008, p. 172).

I would conclude that activism is present in MacDonald's evangelical universalism but that sharing the gospel is not as urgent as it is for traditional evangelicals who hold a belief in eternal conscious torment in hell for the lost. However, it could be argued that activism in terms of social action and relief aid might actually increase if evangelical universalism were more widely accepted.

3) Tom Greggs

Tom Greggs is currently Professor of Historical and Doctrinal Theology at the University of Aberdeen. He was previously Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Chester, and has also taught at the University of Cambridge. Greggs is a Methodist local preacher and would define his own ecclesial setting as that of evangelical Protestantism (2011, p. 46). In 2009 his doctoral thesis was published in book form under the title of *Barth, Origen, and*

Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity (Oxford University Press, 2009). In this book he outlines his position as a Christian universalist.

Greggs supports universalism as opposed to separationism (the eternal division of the saved and damned) but the universalism he upholds is through the person of Jesus Christ. He writes in his preface, "While this book might wish to reject separationism, it nevertheless advocates strongly that the particularity of the Christian faith must be retained in the Christian tradition" (2009, p. xiii). He acknowledges that in certain presentations of pluralism Christianity can find itself being replaced by some idea of generalized religiosity or spirituality. He writes

It is the purpose of this book to demonstrate, therefore, that particularism and exclusivism should not be confused with separationism, and that particularism and exclusivism do not logically stand as contrary to universalism. Christian universalism *must itself be grounded on* Christian particularity and *must itself create room* for Christian particularity (2009, p. xiv).

It is not surprising that Greggs has to look outside the evangelical tradition for allies in his defence of Christian universalism. He chooses to bring together and build on the thinking of two theologians who are not particularly favoured by evangelicals. Greggs says he chose them because,

... these two theologians are the theological greats of their respective periods. Origen was the first ever 'systematic' theologian, and, although later anathematized, his influence can be seen in many of the subsequent concerns of the early church. Similarly Barth is the one figure of twentieth-century theology whose contribution is so great that it cannot be avoided (even if it is to be opposed) (2009, p. 7).

As Greggs admits Origen was anathematized and Barth is frequently opposed. Origen is well known for his belief in the pre-existence of the soul and for reputedly castrating himself. Barth's rather questionable relationship with von Kirschbaum has made many evangelicals suspicious of him. What Greggs does highlight is that both these theologians "mark part of the quieter stream of tradition in Christian theology that extends the hope of God's salvation to all humanity" (2009, p. 8).

Let us first consider Barth's position on universalism. In Barth's writings Greggs argues that it is Barth's doctrine of election that forms the foundation for his position on Christian universalism. Since God is revealed in Jesus Christ as both electing God and elected

humanity it is argued that before creation God chose to accept all humanity. Greggs explains the significance of Barth's doctrine of election in the following way,

The placement of election in the doctrine of God sees its most radical outworking in terms of Christ being the elected human, 'before all created reality, before all being and becoming in time, before time itself, the pre-temporal eternity of God'. There is no room for a prior decision of God to create, or elect and condemn before the decision to elect Jesus Christ (no *decretum absolutum*); instead, Jesus Christ is himself the ultimate *decretum absolutum*. This indicates a singularly positive turning towards humanity, in that it is eternally in Christ that God makes this movement and determines Himself for this covenant of grace (2009, p. 25).

He does not just choose the positives of humanity but also the negatives are taken into himself. Greggs writes,

While the simultaneity of being elected and electing in Jesus Christ may seem dangerous enough, what is more, in the election of Jesus Christ, God elects for Himself the negative part of predestination – perdition, death, rejection, exclusion, and the No of God. These are the things humanity deserves, and yet God decides in His freedom to suffer them in his self-election in Jesus Christ. This does not excuse human sinfulness, but in election God irreversibly takes its torment to Himself (2009, p. 26).

Greggs goes on to write, "Christ suffers rejection on the cross and elects this in order that humanity may be elect even in its rejection of God" (2009, p. 27). Since God has chosen, in Christ, humanity's acceptance and rejection of himself, humanity's eternal future with God is secure. Gregg says, "The hope of salvation for Barth is never grounded in humanity – whether that be human righteousness or human faith. Instead, it is in the victory of Jesus (2010a, p. 503-504). For Barth our salvation does not come through living righteously or even choosing to place our faith in Christ. It is all done for us without our even needing to respond in anyway. Two of the key attributes of evangelicalism that Bebbington identified were crucicentricism and conversionism. Barth's approach to eternal salvation seems to emphasise the doctrine of election over the significance of the cross of Christ. It also negates the need for a personal conversion experience in order to be saved. I question how this can be presented as a theological position for evangelicals if the cross is not central and there is no need for a personal response to Christ's offer of salvation.

Barth's view of salvation is that in Jesus Christ the reconciliation of all men has already taken place. Richard Bauckham writes about Barth's perspective, "The Gospel brings all men the

knowledge of what is already true of them: that in Jesus Christ they are already elect, justified, reconciled" (1978, p. 52-53). Greggs writes about mission that "the missional drive of the church is grounded in bringing the intensity of God's Spirit into situations, relating Christ's eternal work to the present. The missional work of the church is, therefore, one primarily of witness and realization" (2011, p. 61). For Greggs the urgency of the gospel is not calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, to avoid a lost eternity, but to tell people that they are saved because of what Jesus has already done for them. Barth's soteriology does not prompt the Christian to activism in mission in the same way as the traditional evangelical understanding of the means of salvation. Greggs writes, "Christian engagement in mission should be reorientated towards engaging in witnessing to the reality and Lordship of Jesus Christ. This involves a preoccupation not with the Christian self (and perhaps not even with making the other a repetition of that self), but with the other who, as a neighbour, leads us to God" (2011, p. 62). In other words our task as far as Greggs is concerned is to let individuals know what Christ has already done for them and learn about God through them, rather than to seek to convert them to Christianity. Greggs argues that the merits of conversion are assurance and peace in this life. He writes, "This is surely as strong a story and as positive an impulse for the spreading of the *Good News* as there can be. The urgency of conversion is an urgency for transformation of individuals in the present, and through them a transformation of the world" (2010b, p. 162). I am not sure a conversion that brings the added blessing of assurance and transformation in this life, rather than securing eternal salvation, would have prompted missionaries to pack their belongings in coffins and move half way around the world as was true of some evangelical missionaries of the past. Downes writes,

Many of us have read the stories of Victorian missionaries who loaded up their belongings in coffins, knowing they would almost certainly never return home. What motivated these people to do this? It was their understanding there was a heaven to inherit, and a hell to escape (2011, p. 30).

Admittedly, the Victorian missionaries did not always get it right. They were often paternalistic towards the indigenous people of the countries they worked in and insensitive to the local culture. In some situations the missionaries were seen as too closely linked to the colonial powers of the time. However, no one can question their commitment to their

cause. Many went to places like West Africa knowing it was highly unlikely they would ever return.

Not all students of Barth would accept that Barth was a universalist. In fact Barth denied he was a universalist on a number of occasions. Greggs writes,

Although the logic of Barth's theology clearly seems to point in a universalist direction, Barth himself at various points in his theology emphatically denied that he was a universalist. In this much, it may seem that Barth simply presents a dialectic which cannot be resolved, and instead demands a recognition of the mystery of the work of God (2009, p.29).

Greggs argues that Barth denied he was a universalist because he wanted to safeguard God's freedom to choose to be gracious. He wanted it to be clear that God was not compelled to be gracious to all humans. God freely chose to save all humans through the election of Christ. Barth wanted it to be clear that Jesus Christ is the means of salvation not an abstract principle. Greggs writes,

God is under no obligation to elect, and in Jesus Christ, one is able to see the mysterious sovereign *will* of God. God is not bound to creation by a principle of universal salvation, but chooses to bind Himself to creation in the particular person of Jesus Christ (2009, p. 30).

In an article dealing with the impasse of Barth on universalism Greggs writes,

For Barth to place his faith in universalism would be to place his faith in something which was greater than Christ and undermined the sovereignty of God; to place his faith in 'Christ, the reconciler of all' and to proclaim 'Jesus is victor' is not to allow some *a priori* to govern God, but properly to allow God to be the subject of salvation. This is truly what it is to be elected in Jesus Christ (2007b, p. 211).

Maybe Barth's own reluctance to be described as a universalist should temper anyone's rush to own that title today. Oliver Crisp is a little less sympathetic than Greggs in his treatment of Barth's denial of universalism. For him there are only three options for Barth's denial of universalism: he was disingenuous (he was a universalist) or muddled (his position is not coherent) or he could not see the logical implications of his own position. Crisp did not think it likely it was the third of these options. Crisp concluded,

If all humanity have been (derivatively) elected and efficaciously atoned for by Christ, then their soteriological status simply cannot be uncertain. This seems fatal to the consistency of Barth's position (2003, p. 29).

When Greggs comes to his detailed examination of Origen's theology of universal salvation he begins by acknowledging Origen's heterodox doctrine of pre-existent souls (based on his Platonizing tendencies). It is upon this heterodox doctrine that Origen's theology of universal salvation is built. Greggs writes, about Origen's doctrine of pre-existent souls, "Although it is not to be accepted in its entirety as a satisfactory doctrine, if its usefulness to the question of restoring human particularity in a universalist presentation of salvation is to be maintained, it is necessary to consider what logics underlie such a belief" (2009, p. 55). Starting with a doctrine that owes more to Platonism than Christianity does not seem a good place to begin an argument for Christian universalism that would be palatable to evangelicalism. Bauckham writes, "Despite the appeal to such texts as 1 Cor. 15:28 the final unity of all things with God is more Platonic than biblical in inspiration" (1978, p. 48). Bauckham summarises Origen's position on Christian universalism well when he writes,

According to Origen all intelligent beings (men, angels, devils) are created good and equal, but with absolute free will. Some, through the misuse of free will, turned from God and fell into varying degrees of sin. Those who fell furthest became the devils, those whose fall was less disastrous became the souls of men. These are to be restored to God through a process of discipline and chastisement, for which purpose this material world has been created and the pre-existing souls incarnated in human bodies. The process of purification is not complete at death but continues after this life. Nor is it an inevitably upward path: the soul remains free to choose good or evil, and so even after this life may fall again as well as rise. Within this scheme punishment is always; in God's intention, remedial: God is wholly good and His justice serves no other purpose than His good purpose of bringing all souls back to Himself. Thus the torments of hell cannot be endless, though they may last for aeons; the soul in hell remains always free to repent and be restored (1978, p. 48).

Bauckham points out that the logical conclusions of Origen's conviction of the inalienable freedom of the soul should stop him teaching universalism or any final security for the soul. Surely Origen's position means that anyone could remain obstinately against God forever and there is always a chance that those who remain free could fall again at any time. However, Origen ignores such logical conclusions and insists that God's purposes will eventually prevail and all souls will in the end be united to him and never sin again. Greggs seems to suggest that Origen sees more than just a simple restoration of the human soul to what it was but rather a growth through participation in Christ leading to perfection. Maybe it is the quality of this participation in Christ that means that while the individual is

absolutely free to reject God they would never actually take that step having been restored in an enhanced way. Greggs writes,

Origen's sense of salvation is – as a result of his ideas about pre-existence – primarily restorative, but this is not a restoration that is merely a repetition of what was before. While the soul returns to the place whence it came and is made what it was before, the efficacy of Christ's work is such that at the end there will be no further repetition of the ages: there is in Origen no Stoic sense of cyclic and endless determinism, but a restoration in which there is progress and growth in the process. Part of the process of restoration is the soul recognizing what it is as a rational entity and growing in that to perfection (2009, p. 64).

When we analyse Origen's teaching on Christian universalism we see that it is far from crucicentric. Christ's key part in saving souls is not his work on the cross but his nature as the Logos (Divine Reason). As Christ interacts with rational beings he has a restoring impact upon them. Gregg's writes,

For Origen, human beings gain adoption as sons by participating in the Son of God; just as they receive wisdom in participating in Him as Wisdom, and are made holy and spiritual by participation in the Spirit. Through devotion to spiritual disciplines, a human can become a participant in the divine counsel. It is this participation which leads to the immortality of rational souls, and through which the human is transformed into the likeness of God. This participation leads to a unity with Christ (2009, p. 65).

Interestingly, Greggs has written a journal article entitled, 'Exclusivist or Universalist? Origen the 'Wise Steward of the Word' (*CommRom. V. 1. 7.*) and the Issue of Genre'. This article deals with the fact that some of Origen's works present him very clearly as a universalist whilst other writings have more of an exclusivist flavour to them. Greggs concludes that this is because Origen is attempting to be a 'Wise Steward of the Word'. It is not because he is double minded but because he wants to hide the full extent of God's grace from young Christians whose new found faith might be damaged by the knowledge they would eventually be saved no matter how they lived on earth. Origen feared that transparent teaching on universalism would cause his young disciples to turn their back on right Christian conduct which includes the call to mission. This is a clear indication that Christian universalism works against the activism that has been so characteristic of evangelicalism.

Greggs supports a universalism that is achieved through Jesus Christ. He believes Christian universalism is biblical and that it disposes of unhelpful and divisive binaries such as heaven

and hell and the saved and the lost. He supports a Christian universalism that deals with particularities. In Barth's scheme he argues that particularity is preserved because Jesus Christ as a particular individual is the instrument of salvation. In Origen's scheme He argues that particularity is preserved because the Logos is understood to engage with individuals however far they have fallen away from God. However, I do not consider Greggs position to be at all in keeping with evangelicalism. Neither Barth's nor Origen's soteriologies are crucicentric. Barth focuses on the doctrine of election and Origen on Christ as Logos. Barth's doctrine of election seems to rule out the need for a personal conversion experience. Origen's doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul is considered so unbiblical as to have been anathematized. It owes more to Platonist thought than biblical teaching. Both Barth's and Origen's soteriologies detract from the urgency of mission as presented by traditional evangelical teaching and do not promote the activism so typical of evangelicalism.

Conclusion

In the Christian universalism proposed by MacDonald I can see that Bebbington's four key characteristics of evangelicalism are present. MacDonald believes that the cross of Christ is central to salvation. He acknowledges the need for all to freely decide to follow Christ; even if for some that is after death. His defence of his position relies heavily on his own biblical interpretation. While I do not believe there is as much urgency about evangelism for adherents of his brand of Christian universalism I cannot deny that an activism is still encouraged.

When it comes to the kind of Christian universalism that Greggs points us to in the writings of Barth and Origen I would say some of the four characteristics are far less clear. The cross does not seem central to either Barth's or Origen's understanding of salvation. There appears to be no need for a personal turning to Christ in faith in Barth's understanding of salvation. Origen's position seems more dependent on Platonist philosophy than biblical interpretation. Both Barth's and Origen's position would I believe lead to a more restrained activism.

I would find it harder to reconcile Origen's and Barth's Christian universalism with evangelicalism than the position defended by MacDonald. Having said that I think all three

approaches take us way beyond the boundaries of traditional evangelicalism. If Christian universalism was to be widely upheld by those calling themselves evangelicals in the years to come then evangelicalism would change beyond all recognition. It cannot be denied that evangelicalism will be subject to change over time. Those describing themselves as members of 'The Emerging Church' or 'Post-evangelicals' could be seen as evidence of this. However, the change to a Christian universalist position seems to me to go way beyond the parameters of what today is rightly called evangelicalism. It is to adopt what evangelicals have until recently seen as completely unorthodox.

For me right biblical interpretation is absolutely key. I have shown there are good traditional biblical interpretations for the passages that are most often held up as universalist proof texts. These traditional evangelical interpretations sit comfortably with what MacDonald describes as his problem texts. If we do not interpret a passage in a way that does justice to its context then we end up denying the authority of certain parts of the Bible. That is something I do not believe a true 'evangelical' would ever do. Let me remind you what John Stott wrote, "The supremacy of Scripture has always been and always will be the first hallmark of an evangelical" (1977, p. 6).

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